

Grounded





A Nonna Paola,  
con tanto affetto



# ALLE PORTE DEL SOLE

— which he painted on the shed by her garden

“Che cosa mi dici?

Che cosa succede?

Mi dici di cercare una casa

Per vivere insieme

Un grande giardino

Sospeso nel cielo

E mille bambini con gli occhi

Dipinti d'amore.

*“They had a  
fight and Papà  
was trying to  
smooth things  
over”*

Allora i pensieri

Non sono illusioni

Allora è proprio vero che io

Sto volando con te.

Alle porte del sole

Ai confini del mare

Quante volte col pensiero

Ti ho portato insieme a me

E nel buio sognavo

La tua mano leggera

Ogni porta che si apriva

Mi sembrava primavera.”

PEZZIERO

QME

MANO



# To the Doors of the Sun

— song by Gigliola Cinquetti (1973)

“What are you telling me?  
What is happening?  
You’re telling me to look for a home  
to live together  
a large garden  
hanging from heaven  
and a thousand children with eyes  
painted with love.

Now, my thoughts  
aren’t illusions  
Now, it’s really true that  
I am flying with you.

To the doors of the sun  
to the boundaries of the sea  
many times my thoughts  
have brought you with me  
and I’ve dreamed in the dark  
of your light hand  
every door that opened  
felt like springtime.”

MARE

PriMAVERA





## A large garden, hanging from heaven

In the garden,  
Grounded.

Fingers in fertile soil,  
Clung to roots  
And familiar faces  
Stained by departure.

Fused with watermelon rinds,  
Withered carrots,  
Bones  
And skin.

In the garden,  
I see you anchored  
Among raspberries  
And mint.



# Closer

Around 4 pm on a weeknight, my landline will ring.

“Tutte OK???”

I reliably reply,

“Yes, tutte OK. How are you?”

Making it clear that she isn’t calling to chat, her speech hesitates, and I take this opportunity to locate my car keys.

On a hand-crafted oak table, behind the still-corded kitchen phone she’s calling from, is a cardboard box with a dishcloth placed thoughtfully over top. Hot air is escaping from the rim of the box and its walls are becoming weak from condensation. “Pronto.” Dinner is ready for pick up.

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Polenta, derived from Latin ‘crushed grain’ or ‘crushed barley meal,’ is a Northern Italian dish made primarily with flint corn grain, but can include a mixture of other grains such as barley or wheat. It originated in the 16th century as a meal for peasants due to the inexpensive and readily available ingredients involved. Polenta is traditionally prepared by simmering coarsely ground corn flour in water and stirring laboriously until a smooth but firm texture develops and is served on a thin wooden plate.

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I shamefully confess that I have thrown out my grandmother's cooking before. On more than one occasion, I've unveiled the dishcloth atop that cardboard box only to be choked by the stench of a thousand garlic cloves. Many times, I've carefully set the polenta aside and thrown the remains into my green bin, indirectly feeding the family of raccoons developing generational capital on the side of my house. I often feel unappreciative and disgraceful for discarding the food that she prepares, with love, for me. Food she gives as a gift. Food that was scarcely available to her until she immigrated to Canada in the sixties.

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Apprehensive eyes meet across the table.

"Nonna...fa bene da mangiare?"

A wrinkled plastic Walmart bag held high by trembling hands, brimming with oyster mushrooms foraged along the Humber River trail. Cauliflower deep-fried in thick, oozing batter. A dish I've degradingly dubbed "chamb:" chicken and lamb cooked together in a chaotic tomato sauce capable of confusing even the most assured carnivore.

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It's not that my grandmother is an inept chef, it's that modern Canadian culture has surpassed the limits of her humble Italian cuisine. It's not confusion or poor taste, it's the overwhelming excess of resources in Toronto that fuels her haphazard experimentation with food. No, she won't fall behind. My grandmother's determination to keep up is honourable. It's unlike mine. Her gratitude towards this food, towards this life, is unwavering. It's unlike mine.

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I'll often go to her house for a light lunch. Some penne with sugo, a salad. Nothing too abrasive. We'll chat slowly, occasionally calling my mother to translate.

“Come se dice... ‘un barile?’”

She'll wrack her brain trying to refigure an Italian joke in English while I force laughter to distract from my humiliating incomprehension. She'll tell me stories about her life in Italy, as the radio, tuned to RAI 1, slips through the cracks in our conversation and corrodes the barrier of silence between us by seducing a united hum to Nicola di Bari's lighthearted tune “Vagabondo.”

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About one quarter up an Apennine Mountain bordering Abruzzo and Lazio, amid farmlands and spiraling dirt roads decorated with Trebbiano grape skins in September, is Case Cascone. Most of my grandmother's stories take place here, in her hometown. Over heavily sugared espresso and jagged slices of pear cut in the palm of her bare hands, she tells me a story about her great-grandmother's second husband — the man with the barrels.



On an unassuming evening, appx. 1950s, my great grandmother decided to make polenta for dinner and descended the cold concrete steps of her cantina to collect the necessary ingredients. She noticed that her family's stock of corn flour and wheat grain had depleted suspiciously quicker than usual and made a scandalous discovery: her new husband was leading a dual life. For months, he had been stealing grains, meat, and wine from my grandmother's family, packing it in "barile" (barrels), and rolling it down the dirt road to his wife and four children who lived in a small town closer to the base of the mountain.

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Although I've heard the "barile" story countless times, there are details in each retelling that I fail to appreciate. There are amendments that make the dinner crowd shriek and spill red wine, but they're beyond my linguistic reach. As a young girl, I audaciously interrupted the flow of conversations to request translation. With enthusiasm, my relatives offered insight as I demonstrated my determination to be a part of their cultural legacy. At twenty-three, I'm too embarrassed to interfere, to expose my pathetic aphasia, to feel everyone's scornful eyes on me as I come to terms with my broken tongue. Among family, I've become an outsider: observing from afar, peering in when I can.

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The “instant” stuff doesn’t come close to the real thing. Sure, it’s good enough, but the best polenta cannot be made in an instant. The best polenta requires at least thirty minutes, and for those thirty minutes, my grandmother and I are in the kitchen together. We’re taking turns stirring corn flour with a wooden spoon, patiently watching bubbles form, and quietly giggling when they pop in our faces. I ask if she’s ever tried simmering cornmeal in milk instead of water to achieve a creamier texture. We’re not peasants cooking polenta to survive; this moment is love and luxury. It brings me close to her. I want to be closer to her.

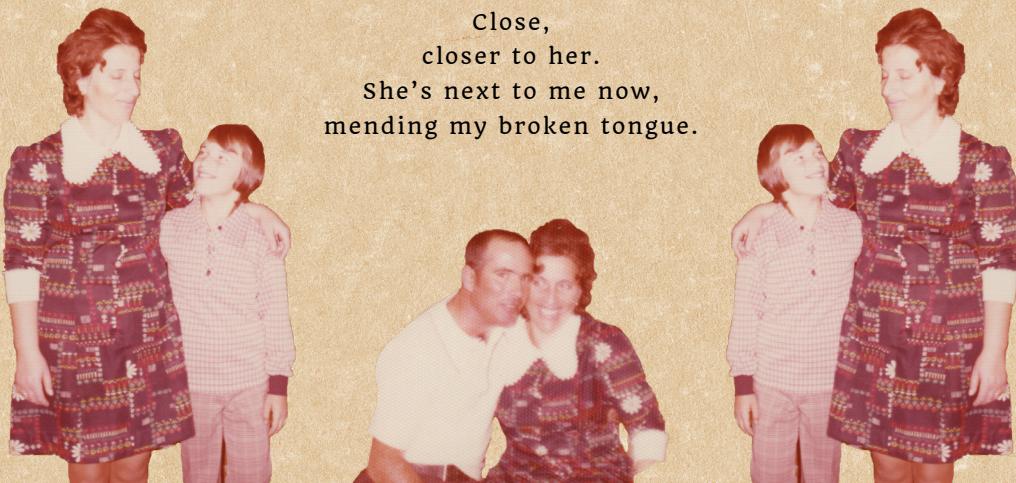
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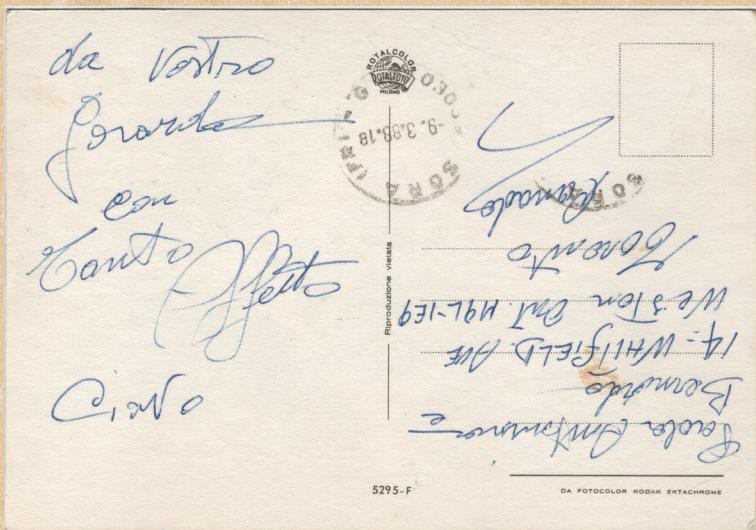
Around 6 pm on a weeknight, I arrive home from my grandmother’s house. I bring the cardboard box into my kitchen and unveil the dishcloth placed thoughtfully over top. I set the polenta aside and put the remains in my fridge; maybe I’ll go back for them this time. Yes, my grandmother’s cuisine is questionable — but she has mastered polenta, the dish of the poor. With each bite, I appreciate every rotation of her wooden spoon. With each serving, I sense her warmth and sincerity. After a tiring day, eating my grandmother’s polenta is comparable to an act of restoration. It feels like falling asleep in her lap as a child. It feels like home.

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Close,  
closer to her.

She’s next to me now,  
mending my broken tongue.





# POLENTA FOR TWO

## Ingredients

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup of corn flour (Bertozzi)  
2 cups water  
1 tsp extra-virgin olive oil  
1 tsp salt  
Basil leaf  
Tomato sauce  
Parmigiano-Reggiano (for garnish)  
Peperoncino flakes (for garnish)

## Cooking Instructions

1. In a cooperative medium-sized pot that isn't prone to sticking, bring 2 cups of water to a boil.
2. Sprinkle one tsp of salt (or a little more to taste), lightly drizzle some olive oil, and toss in the basil leaf (whole or roughly torn apart).
3. Gradually add  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup of corn flour to the boiling water. You can sift it in or run it through your fingers a pioggia (like rain). Choose your method, take your time.
4. Once all the corn flour is added, reduce to medium-low heat. Continually stir gently with a wooden spoon until the mixture begins to thicken.

(The corn flour is your newborn now. It needs constant attention. Have a snack. Put on a record. Call a relative you haven't spoken to in a while, but don't stop stirring.)



5. Once the corn flour is thick, tender, and shiny, turn off the heat and let the polenta set in the pot for about five minutes.

(If you're unsure whether the polenta is ready, bring the wooden spoon to the centre of the pot and let go. If it stands or leans, the polenta is ready. If it falls quickly, the polenta needs to be cooked longer.)

6. If the polenta is ready, you can either start plating or keep cooking for a few more minutes to enhance the corn flavour. If you choose to keep cooking, reduce the heat to very low and keep stirring.

(If the polenta gets too thick, just add splashes of water accordingly.)

7. Serve the polenta on a flat plate with tomato sauce spread evenly on top. Garnish with parmigiano, peperoncino, and basil.

(Traditionally, polenta is served on an unsealed wooden plate to absorb excess water and thicken the dish further. It also adds a subtle aroma to the dish when served hot — one that is cozy, comforting, and humbling.)

8. A tavola.

9. Buon appetito.

10. <3





In the garden,  
Dissolved,  
Washed away  
With the rain.

Are you firmly planted?

Pierced fingertips,  
Carefully plant  
Droplets of warm blood  
Deep in damp soil.



## Caught in time, so far away

Spotless double vanity bathroom.  
Caught in time, so far away.

Cold purple marble flowing underfoot and climbing halfway up walls. Two magenta ceramic sinks. Two small lamps overhead, radiating hot incandescent light. Two neatly folded hand towels, "lui" and "lei," that have been dry since 1997.

Often, I wander up creaking hardwood stairs and lock myself in this purple chamber. Since there are no windows, I can indulge in the stillness of this unaffected space. I sit in the empty tub. I wonder what colour the water would reflect with a few dried flowers from the garden or if the decorative silk shower curtain would keep the warmth of a bath in. Departing, I take my time selecting a delicately engraved soap and wash my hands in one of the magenta sinks.

I look up at my reflection. Alone.  
Then over at the unoccupied vanity next to me.  
I empathize with the vacancy of this space.

# I am held by fierce hands

moulded by scrapes / pricked by thorns  
covered in infallible veins  
lifted by shoulders / massaged by tradition  
resistant to tragedy / winged / unwavering  
watched by eyes / at 80  
more iridescent than seas  
marked / irrevocably / by the bridge of a nose  
mountainous / ancient / immovable  
branded by tongues  
transitive / untranslatable  
only somewhat mine



## Panco — in her words



“For Zio B.  
when he was a baby,  
Nonno Sabbatino  
take the milk from the cow,  
And I boil,  
Half water half milk  
And I put in a bottle,  
And put in the  
pozza de L'aqua,  
Down,  
And it make it fresh  
for two days.

(We work lots at that time.  
You know?)

And...um,  
That dog,  
Came with me  
At 5 o'clock in the morning,  
Every morning.

He come front to me,  
And make a face so happy,  
you know?  
Because he know  
I give some milk,  
A piece of bread.

But,  
When I ready  
with the bottle of milk, He  
know I was finish  
He turn,  
And he go byself.

He knows he go too, no?  
Because he knows  
he has to go  
with the sheep.

He knew,  
When I was done with bottle,  
it was time to do his work.

You see the animal  
how smart he is?”

# Panco — in my words

(in attempted Italian)



Quando Zio B. era un bambino,  
Nonno Sabbatino prende il latte della mucca nella  
mattina. Io faccio con acqua e friddo per due  
giornata e fresco. Ho lavora tanto. Panco vieni con  
me tutte le mattina - eccitato avere il latte e pane  
da me. Ma quando io pronto per partire, e faccio il  
latte al bambino, Panco vai. Lui girata e vai da solo  
dalle pecore. L'animale a tanto intelligente.

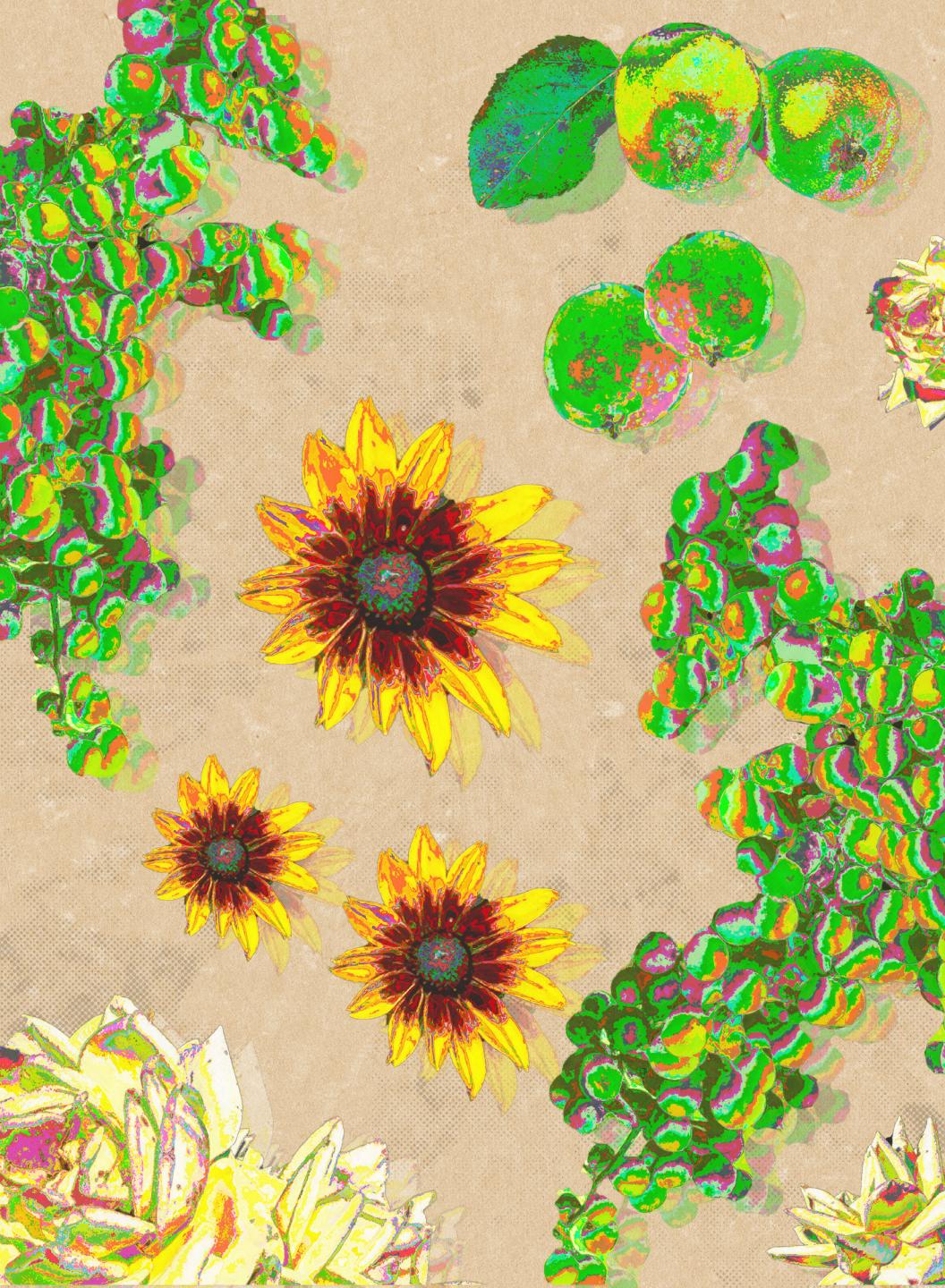
## Panco — in my words

When your uncle Bernardo was still a baby, my father used to milk the cows early in the morning. He would collect the milk in pails and bring it home for me. I boiled it with water in equal parts and then cooled it for two days in the basement under cold water to keep it fresh. Can you believe how hard we worked for a bottle of milk?



Anyway, Panco would come with me to fetch the bottle every morning at 5 o'clock. Every morning he was there. He would see me with the bottle and get excited, because when I went to fetch the bottle, I would treat him to a few drops of milk and pieces of old bread. But when I was ready to feed the baby, and ready to leave with the bottle of milk, he would sense my change in behaviour and his demeanor would shift. Without being told, he would turn away and run off by himself to tend to the sheep. He knew it was my time to feed the baby, time for my work, and time for his work too.





In the garden,  
Fully bloomed.

Bathed in sunlight,  
Sheathed in grapevines,  
Crowned by overgrown apple stems.

To the doors of the sun,  
Ascend.

With fruitful memories,  
Fly home.





